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Military games

Scary leaks calculated to win weapons funding

By David Wood
Los Angeles Times Service

WASHINGTON — During a break-fast session with reporters recently, Gen. W. L. Creech, commander of the Tactical Air Command, unexpectedly disclosed that the Soviet Union had developed three new fighter planes that might out-perform the best fighters currently in the U.S. arsenal.

The result was alarming headlines in newspapers — and success for the Air Force with a time-honored Washington ploy: the calculated leak.

Earlier, the Air Force had asked Congress for \$23 million in the fiscal 1983 budget to begin development of a new-generation fighter. Classified intelligence analyses of the new Soviet threat had been available to key members of Congress, but the request was in danger of falling victim to the pervasive budget-cutting mood on Capitol Hill.

Two weeks after Creech disclosed the previously secret assessment of the new Soviet aircraft, however, Congress voted to let the Air Force go ahead with research and development for the U.S. fighter.

The incident illustrates a bureaucratic maneuver common enough in the past but becoming increasingly prevalent since the Reagan administration took office: selective leaking of intelligence and other information to tilt decisions on important defense questions.

It is a trend that some military analysts fear may fritter away Pentagon credibility and help dissolve national support for building a stronger defense.

It always has been difficult, even under the best of circumstances, to assess accurately the threat posed by the Soviet Union or other potential adversaries and to shape the budget to meet such challenges. And the pressure from American military establishments always has been tremendous.

Indeed, President Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, according to the Soviet leader's memoirs, glumly acknowledged during informal talks at Camp David 23 years ago that neither was able to resist the demands of generals who had intelligence reports about what the other side was believed to be doing.

Ironically, as U.S. intelligence gathering and analysis have become more sophisticated, the translation of threat assessment into budget reality has become more frantic.

Despite the Reagan administration's commitment to a five-year, \$1.5 trillion increase in military spending, blossoming budget deficit projections have convinced Pentagon planners that they should get new weapons systems approved quickly, before congressional support for big defense budgets evaporates.

As the Air Force competes for funds with the Navy and the Army, defense analysts say, leaks have become more profligate.

"In the old days there were few leaks, and there was always a guy from the FBI in my office the following morning trying to find the leaker," says retired Gen. Daniel O. Graham, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). "Hell, now it's gotten so rampant I don't think they bother with that anymore."

Briefings offered

Compounding the problem for Congress and the public is the government's penchant for stamping nearly all intelligence analyses "top secret." As a result, the editor of a respected military journal says, independent verification of leaks has become more difficult.

The Pentagon does offer classified briefings on such issues to members of Congress, but the sessions are not normally well attended. And the public has no access to such briefings, which could give better perspective to issues that have been the subject of selective leaks.

Even experienced congressional staff members with security clearances say they are having increased difficulty digging information out of the Pentagon. "You tend to go to your friends over there," one aide says. "The problem is that your friends tend to share your ideology, and sometimes I feel I'm not getting a balanced picture."

In the resultant cauldron of leaks and rumors, rational, calm and independent thinking on defense often gets short shrift. That is unfortunate any time, but it has become more perilous now for two reasons:

First, the high technology involved in modern weapons systems has dramatically lengthened the time it takes to bring new weapons from concept through production into use. The budget decisions Congress makes this fall will shape the American defense posture well into the 21st century.

Second, because of a slowdown in defense spending in the 1970s, dozens of major weapons systems will become obsolete within a few years. Thus, the nation faces decisions now on a wide variety of important military programs, ranging from the MX missile to the 600-ship Navy and a fundamental re-equipping and retraining of the Army.

Look for evidence

Between "selective" intelligence leaks and the increasing classification of thorough intelligence analyses, it is becoming clear that military intelligence personnel tend to look around for evidence to support their causes.

It was precisely to avoid this problem that the process of gathering, analyzing and collating intelligence data into official "threat assessments" was created.

Under the system, reports on Soviet military technology, weapons production, defense spending, strategy and other subjects are analyzed by the CIA and its Pentagon counterpart, the DIA, as well as by Navy, Army and Air Force intelligence branches. This work then is gathered into one National Intelligence Estimate.

The estimate is supposed to rise above the institutional biases of the individual services and intelligence agencies.

But according to former and current intelligence executives, the process has gotten seriously skewed, with the more "aggressive" DIA gaining an edge over the more traditionally cautious CIA.

Graham, who as DIA director engineered the agency's rise in influence in the White House and national security circles, dates the beginning of the DIA's ascendancy to the early 1970s, when the CIA was widely criticized for consistently underestimating Soviet military power.